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ABSTRACT

This presentation addresses issues of faculty evaluation in the university context and the effective use and usefulness of portfolios. A section on portfolio content validity asks about the right things to include and briefly discusses scholarship, teaching, and service components. A section on criterion-related validity asks whether rival interpretations of portfolio evidence are possible or likely and argues that this point addresses the difficulty in operationally defining excellence in teaching and excellence in service. This section also argues that in the absence of articulated assessment criteria, there will be a movement toward uncritical acceptance of a faculty member's self-evaluation. Other points include the following: (1) preoccupation with construction and updating of portfolios may encourage summative as opposed to formative evaluations of faculty; (2) the accumulation of evidence in faculty portfolios can become overwhelming; (3) personal statements in portfolios are important as they can provide an integrating framework for an otherwise overwhelming array of evidence; (4) contents must be constrained by performance criteria reflective of institutional and departmental context; and (5) emphasis on summative evaluation creates a strong bias against documenting anything other than excellence in the portfolio. (JB)

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REDISCOVERING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE THROUGH PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT: IMPLEMENTATION AT TWO LEVELS OF TEACHER EDUCATION

ED 383 679

Symposium presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education

February, 1995

Critique of the Usefulness of Portfolios to University Administrators

Stephen C. Wilhite

My presentation will address some of the validity issues Toni raised as they relate to faculty evaluation in the university context. I will then go on to address some of the questions Toni raised about the effective use of portfolios. Along the way, I will reflect on and take issue with some of the points Jack made.

Content validity

Have the right things been included in the portfolio?

Portfolios have been in use for some time in many university settings, although they are perhaps more appropriately called dossiers, as Jack suggested, because they have not tended to document the developmental nature of the individual's career.

Scholarship component of faculty portfolios tend to be the most well developed. In general, I think that the right sorts of information related to scholarship tend routinely to be included.

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I doubt that this is true of the ***teaching component*** of the portfolio. Faculty must be encouraged to go beyond student evaluations and course syllabi.

And, faculty must be encouraged in constructing the ***service component*** of the portfolio to go beyond a listing of committee service.

But, there is a real potential benefit of portfolio construction -- to move faculty to a more qualitative assessment of teaching and service.

There is even the potential with the use of portfolios to better demonstrate how a faculty member's teaching, scholarship, and service are interwoven and relate to each other.

Criterion-related validity

Are rival interpretations of portfolio evidence possible or likely? -- This question points to the difficulty in operationally defining excellence in teaching and excellence in service.

Here I part company with Jack who observes that "the portfolio assessment will not be hindered by a priggish insistence to meet pre-established criteria for reliability and validity."

He goes on to argue that "under the conditions of the classroom, the communal activity that will be reported in the portfolio will operate to provide direction and standards."

I am not so sure.

I fear that aggressively pursuing portfolio development and assessment among faculty groups, in the absence of articulated assessment criteria, could doom the movement. I fear that waiting for standards and direction to emerge from the

process of developing portfolios will make faculty members increasingly hesitant to evaluate the work of their peers -- that is, that there will be a movement toward uncritical acceptance of a faculty member's self-evaluation.

Are portfolio assessments useful? Do they have consequences?

I have a concern that preoccupation with construction and updating of portfolios will encourage summative as opposed to formative evaluations of faculty.

Viewing a portfolio, in Jack's words, as "a collection of the best work designed as a demonstration of a professional vitality and vibrancy" suggests to me that it may be of limited usefulness in pre-tenure evaluations of faculty.

In such evaluations, the developmental nature of a faculty member's total record is more important than the "best work" nature of the record.

Are portfolio contents nothing more than examples of workaday activity?

This is a real problem with faculty portfolios. The accumulation of evidence becomes overwhelming.

This underscores the need for operational definitions of excellent performance, the need for performance criteria in each category of evaluation.

Contents must address assessment criteria, and these criteria must have some degree of specificity.

Do portfolios portray faculty members' individuality?

Here I would argue for the importance of personal statements as a component of portfolios.

I have been struck recently in reviewing the portfolios of faculty seeking tenure and promotion by the importance of personal statements. They can provide an integrative framework for the otherwise overwhelming array of evidence. They can demonstrate how activity in the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service is synthesized into a coherent view of oneself as a member of the faculty.

Are portfolios reflective of the context in which the faculty member is working?

This question relates again to the adequacy of performance criteria -- are the criteria shaped by the institutional and departmental context?

If they are not, there is a serious failure of leadership in the institution; portfolio contents must be constrained by performance criteria, and these criteria must be reflective of the institutional, departmental context.

Do portfolios reflect the faculty member's growth and development?

I am not so sure. I fear that the emphasis on summative, as opposed to formative, evaluation predisposes faculty members to maintain that performance has always been excellent -- there is a strong bias against documenting anything other than excellence

The issue of self-selection of portfolio contents -- The selection of portfolio contents must be constrained by specific performance criteria; otherwise, the peer review process will be reduced to a cursory review of colleagues "best work" with no

critical appraisal of how that work furthers the goals of the department and the institution.

Is the use of portfolios cost effective?

Issues: Time demands on faculty constructing their portfolios

Time demands on faculty and administrators evaluating the portfolios

Practical methods of reporting on evaluation of portfolios, of scoring portfolios -- e.g., scoring after viewing only a few entries per category, holistic scoring

This issue is, in turn, related to the issue of personal statements as a means of organizing and integrating information in the portfolio -- help the reader focus on salient features of the portfolio.

Is the enriched data base being used to further faculty development?

Despite these concerns, I see increased reliance on portfolio assessment in the evaluation of faculty as positive. I see portfolio construction as a means of encouraging faculty to be more creative and inclusive in their teaching and in their service to the institution. I believe that wrestling with the issues inherent in the use of portfolios will encourage faculty to re-examine and revise criteria for excellence in scholarship, teaching, and service. I believe that the end result can be a more holistic approach to faculty development and evaluation.